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## THE IMAGINATION OF ADOLESCENTS

By WALTER LIBBY

Under this title I wish to record a particular investigation carried on during the last two years. No attempt is made to treat the subject of adolescent imagination comprehensively or even to show all the pedagogical inferences to be drawn from this special study. In fact the scope of what I have to say is still further limited, as the investigation concerned itself merely with one aspect of the general topic, namely, the relation of the imagination of school children to their feelings.

In the first place there was presented to a fourth year class of Illinois High School pupils a somewhat sentimental picture on which they were asked to write a composition. In the foreground of the picture a young lady stands at an old-fashioned gate weeping, and in the background a horseman in white suit and cocked hat is riding away. The class to whom this was first presented consisted of forty-one,—seventeen boys and twenty-four girls. The compositions written by them showed that the picture appealed strongly to their stage of development. All the students wrote fully and with apparent spontaneity. The teacher, who wrote a few comments on the margins, was inclined to prune away epithets and to check the exuberance of the style. The "fine writing" of which the pupils were accused by their preceptress seemed to me to spring from the exaggerated ardor of their feelings as gauged by maturer standards. If these so-called faults in writing are merely matters of literary style, then style must be considered very vital and personal, and to really modify it would involve a reformation of the pupil's nature.

In order to establish a basis of comparison this same picture was presented to pupils in an Illinois grade school, namely, to twenty-three of fourteen years of age and over, to fifty-one of thirteen years, to thirty of twelve years, twenty-three of eleven and seventeen of ten. Needless to say there was a very marked difference in the compositions from the grades and those from the fourth year High School class. This difference can be briefly described by saying that the compositions from the grades were largely objective, while those from the High School class were decidedly subjective. Also noteworthy is the fact that the line of cleavage occurs after the fourteenth year. I was led to make a somewhat closer study of the returns from the twenty-three grade pupils of fourteen years and over as compared with the returns from the fourth year High School pupils. I found that the general and rather vague distinction indicated by the terms subjective and objective admits of more definite statement. Of the twenty-three grade pupils twenty,—nine out of nine girls and eleven out of fourteen boys,—mentioned "the picture" as such, while not a single such reference occurs in the forty-one High School productions. All the latter entered at once sympathetically into the situation portrayed. The picture aroused their emotions and *ipso facto* stimulated the imagination.

Closely related to the objectivity of the work in the grades is the inclination to give a number of loosely connected details. In the High School compositions the observations are unified by the underlying emotion. This might be stated from the point of view of the teacher

of rhetoric. The more mature productions are marked by greater unity, more careful explicit reference, and a more complex sentence structure. To deny that the language teacher is to be credited with a considerable share in this improvement would be to take a cynical attitude towards the profession, but to deny on the other hand that the natural evolution of the adolescent powers is a large factor in this change would be to ascribe to language teaching a more artificial character than it deserves. The teacher of composition can exhort the pupils to select in writing a certain point of view, but in imaginative writing the magnet that draws to a centre the details of the work of art is the emotion of the writer. To illustrate from our returns, in eight of the forty-one High School compositions the mood, the emotional tone of the essays, was struck by the words "Never to return," but no such phraseology is found in the work from the grades. It may be worth noting that seven out of the eight compositions in which this melancholy refrain occurs were written by adolescent girls. Sixteen of the High School boys took it for granted that the man on the black charger was the young lady's lover riding away; one took him for a young husband. Of the twenty-four High School girls eighteen thought he was a lover, one a messenger, one a father, and four a brother. Of the fourteen grade boys five took the horseman for a husband, one for a lover, one a son, one a son or brother, the remaining six failing to see him or to specify. Of the nine grade girls four thought him a husband and one a lover, the other four neglected the question.

Fully one-third of the older students imagined the hero and heroine to have been friends in childhood, while to only one of the grade pupils did this idea occur. In this matter we might think that the adolescents had been influenced by their reading of novels, especially as childhood friendship is mentioned by the boys almost as frequently as by the girls. Certainly imitation of the fiction read by these students would strike the most careless reader of these essays, but we must expect that the adolescent mind adopts for its own that which really appeals to its nature.

It is, of course, obvious that their studies and more serious reading must influence and give balance to the pupils' imaginative constructions. Of the High School boys ten make Germany the scene of the plot and one, France. Of the High School girls eight locate the incident in Germany, five in France, four in America, two in Austria, and one in England. Of the grade boys one mentions Germany, two America, besides one who calls the cavalier a cow-boy. The grade girls disregard the geographical question. A large percentage of the High School pupils mention definite times like the war of 1870, of 1696, and the war of the Austrian Succession. Among the grade pupils two mention the War of the Revolution, one the Colonial Period, one "once upon a time" and one "olden times." That the incident portrayed in the picture occurs in war time is taken for granted more frequently in the High School than in the grades, and more frequently by the boys than by the girls.

Although, as already stated, the compositions in the grades are markedly detailed, a single detail, the autumn leaves lying on the ground, is more frequently mentioned by the older pupils. The High School girls especially make a point of the dead leaves. By them, however, the leaves are not considered merely as a detached detail, but are given unity, by their emotional suggestiveness, with the whole story. They are symbolic of the melancholy of a touching farewell. The High School pupils, and again especially the girls, are bolder in the use of ornate and unusual epithets. The grade pupils seldom venture

beyond such descriptive terms as "swampy" and "fine," although in one case "sad-looking" was used. The epithets used by the High School girls indicate that they are more eye-minded and more ear-minded, less motor-minded than the boys. One feels in reading these compositions how great a part is played in emotional scenes by faintly heard sounds, impressions of temperature, and of slight pressures, such, for example, as are produced by a passing breeze. Among the adolescents again greater imaginative sympathy is indicated by the use of direct discourse, the first person and proper names. I was disappointed by the absence of burlesque in the High School compositions. Only one boy gave the comic muse rein, suggesting that the moral of the story was "that soldiers, book-agents and travelling men generally were not to be trusted."

One of the most characteristic things about the High School returns is the rhythm, the musical swing of the sentences and paragraphs. The imagination seems under the sway of a musical mood. The likeness of the compositions to popular fiction is in this respect remarkable. One might describe this rhythm as a sentimental languorousness, similar to the cadence of a Strauss waltz. This characteristic could, I think, be expressed less vaguely in the terms of rhetoric.

I shall not go into details in reference to the latter part of my investigation. After establishing the distinction between the imaginative work of students of eighteen years of age and those of fourteen, I submitted this same picture to the four classes of an Illinois academy in order to show stages in the development of the imagination during the High School age. Later a picture of a Roman Chariot Race was presented to the four forms of an Ontario Collegiate Institute. It appeared from both of these sets of returns that the great emotional and imaginative change in adolescents came after the age of sixteen. The chariot race met with less comprehension and appreciation from boys of fourteen and fifteen than I had expected. Occasionally all enthusiasm for the race was smothered by a schoolmasterly, expository spirit.

A popular picture with an ambiguous title, *In Full Cry*, was given as a subject of composition in the four forms of a second Ontario Collegiate Institute, and also in the four forms of an Ontario Normal School, where the students average twenty-one years, in order to secure a basis of comparison between High School students and those of maturer age. Finally, a picture called *A Serious Affair* was presented to the four forms of a third Ontario Collegiate Institute and to three forms of an Ontario High School.

The whole investigation confirms the views of various experts as to the close interrelation of the imagination and the feelings. What differentiates prosaic thinking from imagination is the presence of the feeling factor. All the emotions serve as stimuli to the imagination. A genetic view of the emotions has shown in recent years their importance in the maintenance of individual and racial life. If the connection of the imagination with the feelings be firmly established, the vital value of the functioning of the imagination can be inferred. It is no semi-superfluous power that may be exercised or held in abeyance at will, but an aspect of consciousness that may be discerned in every mental process of capital import. I am led, therefore, to dissent in part from the conclusion reached in certain recent investigations similar to mine, which, unduly emphasizing the study of the image, and neglecting the functional aspect of the imagination, claim that the imagination is poorer in the pupils in the High School than in those of the grades. Adolescence is the birth of a richer emotional life, which is dependent in turn upon a wider range of associations,

and upon physiological changes, including the rapid growth of the heart and the development of the tangential fibres in the brain. At the same time adolescence is the dawn of the brightest and most vivid imaginative period. To claim that poor High School teaching has actually reversed the order of nature seems to me to claim too much for defective pedagogy. That our High School teaching is wanting as judged from the standpoint of the psychology of the imagination I feel forced to admit. Much of the work is trivial, desiccated and barren. The imagination shown in our secondary schools is meagre in comparison with what it might be. But High School students have not lost the imaginative function. It would be truer to say that we instructors have lost the control of this vital activity and that cheap fiction is usurping the domain of the educator. When we consider the importance of the imagination for the moral life, that in our imagination we rehearse our virtues and our vices, we must envy the novelists, actors, elocutionists, and artists who sway the imagination and its underlying emotions.